
ILARIA.

By Eleanor M. Ingram.

OF the coming of a strong man armed and how a winsome lady fared forth because of him.

A FURIOUS blast of wind hurled itself against the stone walls with a crescendo howl of wrath, and in answer the great fires that burned at both ends of the hall leaped and crackled, sending forth a shower of sparks.

One of the flaming meteors fell on the sleeve of a dice-player sitting near, and a roar of laughter from his comrades first called it to his notice.

Half a dozen such groups of players were scattered around, absorbed, intent

on the bits of gleaming bone, their grim sullen faces strangely lighted by the flickering torches fixed to the walls.

At the other side of the hall a dozen pages were noisily engaged in a game of bowls, the crash of falling pins mingling with the general uproar of mirth and quarreling.

Only one person in the room refrained from adding to the din—an old man who sat by the upper hearth, his musing eyes fixed on a tall harp drawn close to his chair. By and by some one began a rough war-song, the others took it up, and the harp-strings vibrated faintly under the volume of sound.

No one heard the creak of moving pulleys or the tramp of feet without until the massive doors were flung rudely open and a blast of cold wind swept in.

"Was ever such tumult outside of doom!" shouted the man who appeared on the threshold. "Peace and order, if there be any here with brains; the earl is come home."

Silence fell as if by enchantment, and all turned to stare at the newcomer, dice poised and ball rolling on unheeded. Then there was a general cry of welcome, and they surrounded him eagerly.

"The earl, you say?" called one boyish voice. "Why, Dick, it is too soon by six weeks."

"Soon or late, his ship anchors now," he asserted. "So, get you all in readiness, and bid them open the south rooms and light fires; the master brings his lady."

The shout rang out again, this time in surprise and laughter.

"Another?" exclaimed a bandaged man-at-arms. "There has been no maid in the south rooms for two years, captain."

"Have you been robbing a French village?" jeered a page.

"Hush, and guard your tongues," ordered Dick peremptorily. "The earl has brought his wife."

There was a pause of stupefaction.

"His wife," he repeated, looking around in enjoyment of the sensation. "Aha, gentlemen, you will howl no more songs like that I heard from the beach; you will mind my lady's blushes now, and Rufus, there, will be less ready with his dagger over his wine. The countess she is, and a fair one."

"But where had you time and place for wooing?" demanded the boy who had spoken first.

Dick turned and saluted him mockingly.

"It was not you who wooed, Marcian; the earl needs scant time."

"Tell us—tell us," clamored the others.

"Yes, the story," urged several voices at once. "They cannot be here for half an hour yet; to the story."

The soldier shrugged his shoulders, not unwilling at heart.

"Well, then," he yielded—"but let me to the fire, and fetch a bowl; I cannot talk thirsting. And forget not the south rooms, if you value peace."

He was promptly obeyed; way was

made for him, while one brought wine and another ran to give the necessary directions.

"Now, captain, bid Bertrand play a prelude and begin," shouted Rufus from the band of delighted pages.

"Bertrand has sung worse tales," answered Dick sturdily. "Comrades, there is little happened more than usual for the first month out; a few blows, perhaps—I skip that. Far to the south we were when we met this ship under an enemy's flag. There was a fight; I skip that, too."

"You skip agilely, captain," called a voice.

"And so will you if you interrupt me, Will," he retorted, taking the laugh with perfect good humor. "It was only a fight to jest at; they yielded from fright. But when we went below and the earl flung open the cabin door there was this lady standing slim and straight as a lily-flower and three other maids cowering around her."

"Not a tear had she; her great black eyes were shining clear, and she faced my lord proudly enough, one arm around a little lady hardly more than a child. He looked at her long, then said to us one word:

"'Out.'"

"And we backed from the room with all speed, as you may guess."

"What he said I do not know, but presently the lady cried out in fear and anger."

"'No, no, no!'"

"I heard her protest—aye, and heard the earl laugh."

"In twenty minutes—no more, at least—he opened the door again."

"'Go bring the priest,' he bade, for we had found one in the ship."

"'No, no,' she cried again."

"His answer I could not understand, but it was grimly spoken, and his gray eyes were cold as steel. She hid her face on the child's shoulder and wailed in her own tongue, and he nodded, watching her."

"I fetched the priest, wondering; and a frightened monk he was. Yet when my lord ordered him to wed the lady and himself he found courage to say no. Yes, he said no, and I looked at the earl; but he only answered, 'She goes with me, wife or no wife.'"

"So, they were married, and he carried her to his ship, all her black hair falling over his arm, and we came home."

"But the strange ship we left untouched, save for the chest of woman's gear, which one of the maids signed me to take."

He reached for the bowl of wine and looked around.

The audience was quiet and deeply interested.

"Truly, the earl's wooing is scant," commented Marcian, an auburn-haired boy of sixteen.

Dick opened his lips to reply, then checked himself hastily as there came the sound of many approaching feet.

In an instant the circle was scattered; each sprang to his place or duty as the doors again flew apart.

The two on the threshold stood out between the glare of torches carried by those in the courtyard and the bright lights of the hall, the earl's splendid gigantic figure and the frail, swaying girl he held at his side.

"Place a seat by the fire, Marcian," he said, his strong, clear voice resonant with unquestioned authority. "The countess is chilled. Gentlemen, you see here your mistress."

He bent his head and spoke a few low words to his companion.

A murmur of respectful salute ran around the room; the lady bowed in acknowledgment and moved with dignity to the dais.

There she paused uncertainly, and the earl leaned forward to relieve her of the heavy hooded cloak; but at his touch she shuddered away, and with a quick movement flung off the muffling furs, flashing out in the firelight in her white and silver dress, her dark hair still in the maiden braids that reached her knee, her face a quivering flower.

"Is there no woman here?" she cried in her strange, sweet southern tongue. "Here in your castle am I still alone? My lord, have pity; give me an hour when I need not look at you; leave me a place where I may be with some woman—a peasant, a jailer, if you choose. Will you refuse even that?"

Few there understood her words, but all looked to the earl, comprehending well enough the passionate hatred and

desperation in the crystal voice. He frowned as one to whom a new idea is presented.

"To-morrow you will have waiting-women and all fitting tendance," he answered. "To-night, there is no woman here."

She gasped, and turned away; her eyes met those of the old minstrel.

"Ah, you understand!" she exclaimed, with a swift step toward him.

"Sir, convince your lord and mine that I can bear no more; tell him I am ill—"

Bertrand rose, his face aglow.

"My lord," he began.

The earl silenced him with a glance and caught the lady's hands in his.

"Will you make a scene for these servants?" he demanded sternly. "You are their mistress; will you show them you are my captive? Come; so far as possible, you shall have your will."

She covered her face, uttered a little moan, and swayed dizzily.

He lifted her in his arms and carried her down the hall, but rousing herself, she called across his shoulder to Bertrand, and he followed them.

The south rooms were gloomy enough by night; the hastily lighted fires could not dispel the chill and mustiness of long disuse, and dust lay thickly on the faded furnishings. The earl looked around with dissatisfaction as he placed his burden in a wide chair.

"To-morrow all this shall be changed," he said briefly. "You would come here."

"Only go; it is very well," she gasped. "The old man—let him stay."

"If you want him, he stays. You command here."

"Then go," she retorted, rising again and clenching her small hands. "Go, my lord."

Unmoved, he looked down at the quivering figure, then lifted a goblet of steaming wine from the table, where it had been left in readiness.

"You are cold; drink," he ordered calmly.

"I will not," she flashed.

"Then I remain."

She caught it from him and drank; then flung the goblet at his feet and sank down on a couch in a passion of tears. He turned and left the room.

Bertrand crept closer, shaken with pity. After a time he ventured to throw across her one of the musty velvet coverlets that lay at hand.

The fire rose and fell, hissing as wet snowflakes slipped down the chimney; below rang out the wild merriment that celebrated at once the master's marriage and return.

Suddenly she turned to the minstrel and began to speak, pouring out her story in feverish incoherence, always reiterating one cry: "It was for my sister; I came for her! How could I save her else?" And Bertrand, listening, shivered, and glanced fearfully at the door whenever an echo of one voice floated through the tumult below.

Toward morning she fell asleep, and the castle, too, grew quiet. From time to time Bertrand replenished the fire, stealing softly back again to his place and watching the lady with strange eyes.

At dawn came a hail from without and the grating crash of opening gates. The lady sighed and stirred in her sleep. Presently steps sounded in the corridor and some one knocked.

Bertrand answered the summons hastily.

"Your lady sleeps?" came the demand.

"Yes, lord," he replied.

But she had heard the voice, and rose, pushing back the disordered waves of hair.

"You claim the first daylight," she said bitterly. "I am awake."

The earl smiled, entering. If he had joined in the night's revels no trace was visible in his face or bearing.

"I have brought your waiting-women," he announced. "They cannot understand you, but the countryside holds none who could. Will they content you?"

"Can anything content me in this place?" she exclaimed. "Why did you bring me here? Why did you not leave me there, where I—" Her voice broke.

"Why?" he repeated. "That question I answer, once—because, I love you, Ilaria."

"Oh!" she cried.

"To the noon meal it is fitting that you come down," he went on serenely. "Bertrand will show you the way, or

I will return, as you please. The place accepted must be held."

"If I could hurt you through your pride," she began.

He shook his head with a touch of scorn.

"My pride lies too high for woman's hands to reach. It is your own dignity you would tear down, Ilaria."

"Do not call me that—the name I bore for those I loved," she protested fiercely.

His gray eyes met hers with chill brightness.

"I will call you as I choose," he stated deliberately.

She faltered, panting with anger, then turned and walked blindly to the window.

The earl spoke to Bertrand in passing, and the minstrel reluctantly followed him from the room. Ilaria, turning round, was confronted with two peasant faces, one heavily good-humored, the other keenly interested and curious. She sighed impatiently, and involuntarily glanced down at her tumbled dress.

That noon the great hall, humming with subdued laughter and gossip, fell quiet, before a new sensation as the countess walked regally through, preceded by Bertrand and followed by her two maids.

From the chest brought by good-natured Dick she had drawn her sweeping robes of crimson velvet; her dark hair was coiled high on her small head and fastened with golden pins.

The earl, seeing her, flushed slightly. Coming to meet her, he led her to the carved chair beside his own on the dais, from where one looked down the long room, with all its warlike vassals and squires.

The tables stretched one beyond the other now where usually the men lounged and played. In the winter sunshine the scene showed less wild than by the torches of the night before, and not without a certain careless magnificence.

The men were dressed with richness, and if the gleam of steel was more frequent than that of gold it was rather from choice.

But in Ilaria's ears rang the echoes of a softer speech, the perfume of the burn-

ing pine logs was drifted aside by a breath from a southern garden, and she turned away her head wearily.

"Lady of mine, let this grow less strange to you," said the earl, at her side. "Many a day will you sit here alone while I am across the sea."

"If that freedom comes I shall keep my rooms; the gentlewomen of my land show themselves not so in public," she retorted.

"You may do as you choose when I am not here," he answered.

"And when you are?"

"As I choose."

There was silence until the meal ended, when she made a movement to rise.

"Where would you go?" The cool voice restrained her.

"To my rooms."

"Not so; we are going out. You must know something of your new domain."

"I will not come," she declared haughtily.

He turned quietly to the woman behind her chair.

"Bring the countess's cloak," he directed.

Ilaria guessed the meaning of the order and shot a glance of rage and defiance from beneath her lashes. When the girl returned she rose and suffered herself to be wrapped in the furs; then, standing before him, said under her breath:

"I hate you."

He took his own cloak from the waiting page, regarding her from a strength too great to be disturbed. When he offered his hand she put hers in it without a word and let him lead her from the hall. Marcian opened the door, and gazed at her in a dazzle of admiration.

Above, a gray sky curved sullenly; below, the gray sea rolled and dashed itself high up the castle's ramparts, leaving clinging icicles where it had touched and fallen back defeated. The castle itself showed gray; but grayest of all were the master's eyes that held at once the ice and the storm.

Shivering, Ilaria looked across the desolate sands that stretched away inland bare of habitation. In the courtyard the pages were at their rough sports, and the watching men-at-arms

lent applause and criticism to mingle with the babble of sounds.

It was an hour before they returned to the hall.

"I may go now?" she asked with sarcasm.

"Not yet," he answered. "Listen first to Marcian, there, with his lute; he is a pupil of your favorite Bertrand."

"I am cold," she protested.

"There are fires here."

She walked to the nearest hearth, biting her lips in futile anger.

At a sign from his master Marcian approached, regarding the lady with adoring eyes.

The earl placed a chair for her, and remained standing himself.

The boy sang with crude earnestness and feeling; forgetting that his words were unintelligible to her, he poured out all his sympathy in a ballad that was partly improvisation. But Ilaria did not look up when he ended; her unheeding glance rested on the dancing flames. Marcian obeyed the command to continue with keen disappointment.

The earl's voice roused Ilaria from a reverie deepened by the weariness of many days.

"Bertrand has come for you," he said.

Surprised, she turned to the door and saw that indeed the old man waited there. Too proud to question, she rose, and bending her head in salute, passed from the room.

"Where do we go?" she demanded of Bertrand when they stood outside.

"Where but to your rooms, lady, unless you wish otherwise?" he replied wonderingly.

She led the way without comment. But when he held open the door of her apartments she stopped on the threshold with a cry of astonishment.

The breath of warm air that met her was heavy with perfumes of the East, musk and sandalwood and rose. From ceiling to floor hung folds of carnation-silk in place of the moldy tapestry; carpets from Bagdad and Balsora, a gorgeous tiger-skin of black and gold, scattered cushions stiff with embroidery—all lent their glow of color and beauty.

Far and wide had ridden or sailed Earl Philip and his mighty ancestors; many a rifled ship and city had sent their

wealth to this grim castle; and Bertrand had been given full sway.

"Is it not fair, lady?" he exclaimed delightedly. "Have I done well? And see—the earl bade me bring these."

He crossed to a table and opened an ivory casket, from which shone out the rainbow gleam of jewels. Ilaria advanced a step.

"He kept me below so that you might do this?" she asked slowly.

"Yes, lady."

Her lips quivered.

"It is fair, indeed, Bertrand. Please go, now; I am tired."

He kissed the small, soft hand and went out. She moved forward.

Where the musty bed had stood was a broad divan covered with pale-tinted velvets, and just beyond, an empty niche now held a tall silver cross, which the dreaming artist had wrought with Easter lilies. Impulsively she stretched out her hands, and the tears sprang to her eyes.

That evening the Lady Ilaria descended of her own will to the last meal of the day. When the earl had led her to the seat beside him she waited for him to speak, but he remained silent.

"I owe you thanks for the gifts of to-day," she said at last coldly. "They make my prison less unendurable."

"I intended them to do no more," he answered with equal hardness.

She glanced up quickly.

"I do not buy submission," he added.

"I compel it, or—"

She had not expected her meaning to be so easily read, and the color flooded her face.

"Or?" she repeated half unconsciously.

He looked at her, smiling, and in spite of herself, Ilaria quailed.

"There has never been an 'or.' When there is I will answer you, lady of mine."

She moved restlessly, and turning her head, encountered Marcian's intent gaze.

As she left the hall, later, Bertrand followed.

"Shall I attend you, lady?" he inquired.

Ilaria paused, and shook her head.

"What for, good Bertrand? Last night is over, like many other things. Why, only a month ago I sailed from

Aragon with my sister, only a fortnight have I known your Earl Philip, yet the old Ilaria is quite gone. Leave me alone; I see so many days stretching on ahead; leave me to learn patience, Bertrand."

But there was no patience in the large dark eyes or the angry curve of her lips, and the old man looked after her mournfully.

There is nothing so swift in establishment as a custom, nothing more dismaying than the unfamiliar.

As the forced calm of Ilaria's second evening differed from the wild passion of the first, so each succeeding day was quieter. The castle accustomed itself to her presence below twice a day, and grew less boisterous in its mirth.

She gathered around her such occupations as could be found, aiding her women to fashion garments from the chests of silks and gauzes sent to her rooms, studying the new language with Marcian, or listening to Bertrand's romances of the south. These two loved her devotedly, and she saw no difference in their affection.

The earl seldom entered the rooms that glowed like a crimson rose in the heart of the somber castle. To him Ilaria's bitter coldness never changed except when her anger flared up in bursts of tropic passion, only to die out in something like awe before his calm.

So two months passed.

The cold grew less intense, and the spring fogs drew their dull curtains across ocean and sands. A rumor and agitation ran through the castle. Ilaria felt without comprehending that movement and preparation were in the atmosphere.

She was alone one afternoon when a familiar knock sounded a summons she always recognized and had never dared refuse.

"Enter!" she called.

The earl's tall and stately figure was always incongruous in the oriental luxury of these rooms, but never more so than now, when velvet and fur barely masked the glitter of steel beneath. The sense of some coming event caught Ilaria and held her mutely expectant.

"You were looking from the case-

ILARIA.

ment," he said quietly. "You know, then, what I have come to tell you." Surprised, she shook her head. "You did not see the ships and guess their actions?"

Sudden knowledge came to her. "No; but I begin to understand now," she answered. "You are going away."

"I have been called on an errand that cannot wait—to the aid of a friend. I leave you my most trustworthy men, in charge of Dick Allyn. You will lack nothing; if I do not promise a speedy return it is because you will perhaps rejoice in my absence."

"Naturally," she said calmly. He regarded her steadily, and the old helplessness crept over her, mingled with a new panic and desolation.

"One thing more; it is possible, as always, that I shall not come back. If I die, Dick will take you to your own country, dowered as becomes a widow of my house. It is in my blood to take that which I desire, as it is in my blood to rule; I wanted and took *you*, and I shall hold you while I live, but I wish no captive to my grave. You will pray for my death, no doubt; you will be neither the first nor the last to do so."

"No, no!" she cried in horrified denial.

Something flashed like a white light across his face.

"No?" he exclaimed. "No, Ilaria?"

She laid one hand on the back of the chair by which she stood, finding no word. When he spoke again it was very quietly, but with the force of a resolve unshakeable.

"I have taught you to fear me; when I return I will teach you to love me, my wife."

He swept her to him and kissed her once, the chain of gems she wore catching and snapping like a thread; then turned and left the room.

Trembling, giddy, Ilaria hid her face, the rubies slipping down her dress and rolling away in tiny balls of fire.

An hour later the ships sailed.

"The gray mists cling, the woods are wet
With tears of infinite regret.

Though Summer her dearest gifts may bring,
We can but miss the fair frail thing
That died and left us—wistful Spring."

So sang Bertrand, wandering along the beach where the sea-grass waved under the lapping waves. Ilaria, listening at her window far above, smiled and flushed at some fugitive thought.

"It is May now," she murmured. "Perhaps—"

Marcian eyed her with jealous attention.

"Lady, I wish I knew your language," he said impulsively. "The least snatch of Bertrand's song moves you, while I pour out my soul unheeded. What do you see when he sings, madam—the olive-trees waving in the sun, the green-and-gold lizards gliding down mossy walls, all the beauty of the land that is yours and his?"

Ilaria came back to her chair, opposite which the boy sat on a low stool. "Sometimes," she replied. "This time I saw something else, Marcian."

"You are less sad these last months, lady; your cheeks and lips are hollier, brighter. Oh, if it had been my words, not Bertrand's, that brought the change!" He stooped his head and brushed her floating sleeve with his lips.

She smiled indulgently. "Foolish boy! It is as much yours as his. Is it no pleasure to me that I can speak the language of those around me? I owe that to your patience."

"I wish you did not know it, so I might teach it you again," he answered warmly.

"So do not I," she retorted. "So many tedious hours!"

"They were short to me, lady."

"And the spring is pleasant here, too," she added presently. "Yesterday Bertrand brought me some strange wild flowers from those sand-dunes; I never welcomed more gladly the pomegranate-blossoms that used to open under my windows at home. The sea-gulls wake me at dawn with their sweet, weird skreel. It pierces the rosy silence like those fine javelins of reeds the Moorish warriors cast in sport."

"It is their love-song," he explained, with a tremor in his voice.

"So I fancied," she assented, her soft eyes resting on the line where sky and ocean blended in dazzling azure.

Emboldened, he leaned forward, studying her averted face.

"Lady, it is none of these things that cause your happiness," he ventured. "Do you think I do not know that you, like every one in the castle, rest easier when grim Earl Philip is gone?"

The startled color rushed to Ilaria's temples.

"Hush, Marcian!" she exclaimed severely. "Is that a way to speak of your lord and mine in his absence?"

"Why not, if it is true?" he persisted, daunted yet angry at the rebuke. "Lady, hate shone in your glance when it fell on him; I saw."

Ilaria caught her dress from his grasp and walked to the window. Not even to herself had she put the direct question of whether she still hated Philip.

"When he returns—" she began, with a quivering sense of outraged thought.

"It will be long; his absences are of many months, and he has been gone but two," he declared sullenly.

"He does not come back to an empty house," she suggested.

The boyish resentment and jealousy in Marcian's heart broke forth with all the brutality of youth.

"Nor did he then," he said.

Ilaria turned, struck less by the words than the tone.

"What do you mean?"

The certainty that his exile would be the result of this left Marcian indifferent to caution.

"That you are not the first woman to dwell in these rooms, lady. Why, did you know the earl so little?"

Ilaria caught her breath and stood quite still, gazing at him with bewildered eyes.

"Is that true?" she asked at last.

"Yes," he answered stubbornly.

"True enough, madam. The last had golden hair—"

She stopped him with such a cry of bitter anger as he had never heard.

"Go!" she commanded fiercely.

"Go, and never come here again. I do not believe you; you say it because you hate him. Send me Bertrand; I will know the truth."

"Lady!" he cried, in shame and dismay.

"Go!" she repeated. "Send me Bertrand. Go!" Panting with indignation, Ilaria watched the door close.

In the silence that followed a breath of salt wind fluttered aside the window-curtain and brought, clearly sweet, an echo of the minstrel's song:

"We can but miss the fair frail thing
That died and left us—wistful Spring."

She sank down in the chair and hid her face on its broad arm, sobbing stormily. There Bertrand found her and knelt at her side, taking her hand in both of his with a father's tenderness.

"You know what he said?" she demanded without raising her head.

"Marcian confessed to me, lady."

"And is it true?"

The old man's face grew deeply troubled.

"Dear lady, what should the Countess Ilaria care for such fancies of an hour?"

"Then it is so."

"For two years the rooms have been empty; before then— This I know, they sought the earl, not he them."

She sprang to her feet, shaken with a wrath worthy of Philip himself, her eyes and cheeks blazing.

"And he took me—me—to be the last! I hate him; I have always hated him. He shall see me no more; he will return to find me gone. Bertrand— Bertrand, either you will take me from this place or I will die!"

"Lady—"

"Hush! I speak seriously. If there is no other way I will throw myself from that window when his ship comes in. Oh, I mean it!"

"Lady—"

He followed her with soothing words, and drew her gently to a seat. After a while she wept again, always clinging to him; and so between grief and anger the afternoon passed.

All night long, as on that first night, Bertrand sat at her side, his eyes shadowed by pain and regret.

The earl's ships came home the first day of June.

It was breathlessly hot, and over be

ILARIA.

hind the castle lay a dark bank of clouds, against which the great building showed clear and hard.

Very quiet were the men who came down to the shore—so quiet that the earl looked around in amused irritation. Nor was it better when Dick Allyn met him at the head of the wharf and saluted without a word, his ruddy, jovial face pale and apprehensive.

"My lady's rule has tamed you strangely," the earl observed dryly. "What is it, Dick? The castle has not been taken?"

"No, lord," he stammered.

"What, then?"

The man faltered, at loss for a reply. The other's eyes flashed across the group and glinted into fire.

"Your mistress is ill? Answer!"

"No, lord, but—"

"If she has cause to complain of you," Philip began, significant menace in his level tone.

"Neither she nor you, lord," Dick protested, roused to self-defense. "I did my best; I thought her contented enough until three weeks ago. How should I understand a lady's whims? But Bertrand was with her, and they went together."

"Went? Where?"

"Lord, at dawn Marcian saw them far out on the sea in a little boat. My lady sat in the stern, and Bertrand held the sail; the sky and water were misty red, and the gulls flew past screaming.

"We made what haste we could to find a boat, but suddenly the fog rolled in and we lost them. We have searched every day and found nothing. That night there came a storm—"

The earl put him aside and went on, his face gray. Across the court, through the hall, he went, the people making way for him, up the stairs, and to her door. But there a figure started up from the threshold and seized his arm.

"Lord earl, you are home at last!" it cried wildly. "She is not there; kill me, for I killed her."

The earl's strong hand grasped his prisoner by the shoulder and lifted him into the room beyond. There in Ilaria's crimson bower they faced each other, Marcian white, hollow of cheek, and desperate of eye.

"What have you to do with my wife, Marcian de Fulke?" came the stern question.

"I loved her," cried the boy defiantly. "And because she thought only of you I wanted to hurt you both. I told her who dwelt here two years ago. Bertrand said you would kill me. I am not afraid."

"The son of my old companion-at-arms, who woos my wife in my own house and slanders an absent man!" said the earl with biting scorn.

Marcian winced.

"I offer my life!" he cried miserably.

"I do not war with boys."

Marcian covered his face in grief and shame. Overhead, the long-gathering storm broke in a rolling crash of thunder and ~~fixed~~ the pause with deafening sound. The earl crossed to the window and flung it open, facing the wet wind and glaring lightning. After many minutes he returned to where the boy leaned dejectedly against the wall, his young face worn and wretched.

"Go, de Fulke," he said harshly. "To-morrow you return to your father, and I have profound pity for him."

"I would rather you killed me!" he exclaimed with vehemence.

"It is not for you to decide what I do with you," was the cold reply.

Marcian raised his head, then meeting the other's glance, went out abashed.

The castle settled back into its old routine. Again the men quarreled and gamed in the hall beneath the dais where stood Ilaria's empty chair, again the falling balls and mimic combats made noisy merriment all day. Only, the spiders spun their webs across Bertrand's harp and Marcian was missing from the little band of pages.

The earl was much away. Seldom indeed the ships anchored in their own bay, and then but for a brief visit.

Summer rose to its height and waned, autumn came with violent storms that drove the sand hissing across the dunes, and, lastly, winter closed sullenly in.

Christmas Eve the earl's ships slid into the harbor for the first time in two months, every spar and line hung with glittering ice.

The castle gleamed in the moonlight, armored in diamond mail, and far out over the ocean shone the lights and rang the sounds of Christmas revel. This time Dick did not go ahead with notice of the master's coming, as on the night nearly a year before, and when the great doors opened it was Philip himself who looked down on the scene.

The shout of greeting rang heartily, the faces turned to the door were shining with good-will, but the earl's expression reflected none of the Yule-tide cheer. He was pale, and his left arm hung useless in a scarf.

"I go to my room," he said curtly to Dick, who beamed at his shoulder. "Send there what is necessary."

Rufus, who started forward and caught a light from the wall, looked eagerly at his chief as they went through the corridors, but nothing in the somber face encouraged speech. At the chamber door a gesture dismissed him.

Another page knelt before the wide hearth, feeding the fire with small logs that blazed and snapped. The earl watched him an instant, then said:

"That will do; you may go."

The page rose slowly and turned. A cry of wrath and astonishment broke from the earl.

"You, Marcian de Fulke! You here, in my house!"

The boy moved a step nearer.

"If I come to win your pardon, sir?" he appealed.

"I have none for you. How have you dared come here to my hearth—you who should rather have died in the snow-drifts than cross my threshold?"

"My lord, hear me; oh, I have paid—"

"Paid? You tell me that, with your face flushed with health and your eyes bright? You are young, de Fulke, and your father sent you to me for your first lessons in knighthood; go, and remember that nothing pays for dishonor."

"But if we try to undo a wrong, does it not help?" the boy asked humbly.

"If you could buy her life with your own, perhaps. As you cannot—I have told you to go."

Marcian's face lightened to a strange breathless eagerness.

"I will ask you to remember that

'perhaps,' sir," he said, not without a certain dignity. "I have thought a great deal since you sent me away, and unless you grant me worthy there will be no knighthood for me."

The earl made a movement of impatience and turned away. A chair waited before the fire, and he sat down mechanically, his eyes on the dancing flames, careless alike of the spreading crimson stain on his bandaged arm and the melting ice that dripped from his cloak.

After a while he moved slightly, his brows contracting; the air seemed to grow suddenly fragrant with rose and sandalwood, musical with the rustle of silken garments. He sighed, and his uninjured hand clenched.

"My lord," whispered a faint voice.

Far down on the beach the ice groaned and creaked under the rising tide. The earl rose, and faced the door.

A slim figure stood in the room—a figure around which the light clung lovingly and nestled in the draperies of scarlet and gold. The dark head was proudly held, the sweet, earnest face turned to him. He neither moved nor spoke, but the room faded into blank grayness and flashed out again with all the radiance of a vision. She drew closer, her wide eyes half frightened.

"You are angry because I went away," she said, her tone a silver thread of sound. "I thought I hated you, I thought I wanted to go home, but indeed I was wretched there. Until Marcian came, there seemed no way of coming back, and I was afraid." She hesitated. "If you do not want me, my lord, you can send me back—"

The sentence broke in the fierce movement that swept her into his embrace.

"Mine!" rang the earl's exultant voice. "By the grace of God, *my wife!*"

But presently Ilaria raised her head.

"And Bertrand, Philip, and Marcian? He sought me for so many months, and gave me courage to come back; you will be gentle to him?"

Clear and sweet the chapel-bell pealed out, and a mighty shout rose from the hall below.

Smiling, the earl held her closer.

"Hush!" he said. "It is Christmas Day."